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Independent Chinese Cinema: Filming in the "Space of the People"

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“My motivation is to depict people I can identify with”

An Interview with Ning Ying

S. LOUISA WEI

Ning Ying was admitted to the Beijing Film Academy in 1978 together with the “core” filmmakers of China’s Fifth Generation, but she left China for Italy in 1980 and completed her film training in the Rome Film Experimental Academy in 1986. After returning to China the next year, she first worked as Bernardo Bertolucci’s assistant director for *The Last Emperor* (1987). She made her directorial debut with a commercially successful film *Someone Loves Just Me* (You ren pianpian aishang wo, 1990), and then directed her “Beijing Trilogy”: *For Fun* (Zhao le, 1992), *On the Beat* (Minjing gushi, 1995), and *I Love Beijing* (Xiari nuan yangyang, 2000). *For Fun* and *On the Beat* received many awards at international film festivals, and her realistic representation of contemporary China is highly regarded. Ning Ying’s 2001 documentary *Railroad of Hope* (Xiwang zhi lü) won the Grand Prize at the Cinema du Réel festival in Paris. Her 2005 feature *Perpetual Motion* (Wuqiong dong) was awarded “Most Original Film” at the Rome Asian Film Festival in 2006. (SLW)

The “Beijing Trilogy” as auteur films

S. Louisa Wei (W): When you first got into independent filmmaking, you were hoping for a relatively free mode of creation, not wanting to be a cog in the giant wheel of film industry, right?

Ning Ying (N): Yes, but people were not yet familiar with the concept of independent production.

W: If we look at the way you deal with the relationship between an individual and a community, your spirit is closer to that of the Fifth Generation filmmakers.

N: *For Fun* is indeed about such a relationship. People in the film are educated under Socialist ideology and are unable to free themselves from its doctrines. An old retired man feels helpless after retirement. The only fun he can think of is to return to a group, to set up rules for the group, and to play games with others in the group. In such a process, he seems like a fish that finds water. My film reflects my feeling about this. When the chairman of the Cannes Film festival called me at my home number, I had

never heard of his festival. Then the Berlin International Film Festival also asked for the film. The production company decided to send the film to Berlin, as the Berlinale started earlier than Cannes, and the producers found Germans to be more reliable! (laugh).

W: Zhang Yimou won the Golden Bear in 1988, so the Berlinale was the most famous festival in most Chinese people’s mind.

N: That’s possible. Then people said that after I came back from Europe, I knew exactly what the foreigners wanted to see.

W: *For Fun* is almost like a documentary, but you actually adapted it from Chen Jiangong’s novella, right?

N: The lives in both *For Fun* and *On the Beat* were unfamiliar to me. Chen Jiangong’s novellas inspired me, but he also told me where to find the life models for his characters. I remember the comment on the film that he made during an after-screening forum: “After watching this film, I understood that film adaptation should not be faithful to the original literary work.”

Amateur opera performers
in Ning Ying's early film *For Fun*.
© Ning Ying



W: That's probably why it never occurred to me that these two films had been adapted from literature. They depart from real life and keep a rough quality of life.

N: I actually made the visual "rough" by using smoke to break the polished feel of Kodak film. The sky in Beijing was often filled with dust. Many thought these were low-budget films, but their budgets were average at the time.

W: Around the mid-1990s, Chinese people were watching lustful images from allegorical stories of the past by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Films like yours focusing on the lives of ordinary Beijing people were rare. At that time, the New Documentary Movement had yet to begin, and the Sixth Generation had only made a couple of underground films.

N: You're right. *For Fun* came out in the same year as Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine*. I remember that some said *Farewell* shows the front stage, while *For Fun* reveals the back stage—a group of amateurs playing opera themselves. My motivation to make films is to depict people I can identify with. You can say that every film of mine starts out from a relatively impersonal approach to history. My films are never about myself, but I always find things I can relate to during research and production. Some thought I must know the old man in *For Fun*, but I can say every character in the film reflects a side of me. All my films are like this. People watch *Perpetual Motion* and think of me as a daughter of a high official. *On the Beat* made them think that I was once a police woman. *For Fun* made them think I grew up in a *hutong*. *Railroad of Hope* made them think that I'm from the grassroots class. I feel that I'm a chameleon, changing colour and becoming the character I'm depicting. I would talk and act like that character for a period of time. After shooting *Railroad of Hope*, I walked out of the train just like a peasant worker.

W: For me, the sense of urban space and the rhythm of urban life get stronger from *For Fun* to *On the Beat* and to *I Love Beijing*.

N: *I Love Beijing* is the last film of my Beijing trilogy. I wanted to see the changes of the city through the eyes of a taxi driver, hoping to deliver a sense of alienation within a city we were all once familiar with. In your own city, you can become an outsider, a stranger, and become uncertain about your own identity. The institution under the Communist regime has a strong presence in the first two films, but this

third work reveals people's confusion after losing traditional values under a loosened ideological context.

W: I have a deep impression that when the taxi driver looks for a girlfriend, he's quite conscious of the kind of woman he finds as a reflection of his own social status. The film was ahead of its time, more like those made by Sixth Generation directors in the late 1990s—often focusing on characters constantly moving or wandering in the city. Your later films, such as *Railroad of Hope* and *Perpetual Motion*, are also ahead of their time.

An experiment with independent documentary

W: Speaking of *Railroad of Hope*, it's a very special film. Did you shoot it with just one camera?

N: Yes, I shot it with one camera and with only one battery. I saw the DV camera in a Sony product exhibition. It was a BX2000 and not even a PD150. The battery lasts 10 hours. I had a cameraman with me and originally planned to rent a Beta camcorder. When we were in the train station, we could hardly get a ticket. It was not possible to recharge the battery on the train. This small camera was first intended for research use, but in that situation, I asked my cameraman whether he could handle it. He said no, since he was used to operating heavy professional cameras. The weight of this camera was just right for me, so I told him about the interview and asked him to pose the questions.

W: I heard it was mostly him asking questions.

N: Yes. I designed the questions for him, and he interviewed people while I shot. Every evening, we exchanged ideas and discussed problems in interviews and shooting. I used the manual mode of the camera most of the time. For interviews, I needed philosophical questions so the meaning of life could be discussed. I didn't want to explore social problems through this film. Some people criticised this film for "asking a lot of questions that peasant wouldn't think about." My response is that this very comment shows their own ideological constraints: "Don't you see that all the peasants are answering my questions?"



Ning Ying's documentary *The Railroad of Hope* was shot on board a train transporting migrant workers to Xinjiang.

© Ning Ying

W: I also remember debating with others about one question asked: "What is happiness?" They said that this question was too "bourgeois" for the peasants. I said, "Everyone wants to be happier. Peasants also want to live a happier life, so they answered the question."

N: You're right. I kept asking myself during the filming process: what is my relationship with the subject I'm filming? Without being able to identify with them in one way or the other, I simply could not start shooting. In China's city or countryside, most people are willing to pay a dear price for a brighter future. Many are in search of a better future. Such a realisation gave me a sense of direction.

W: Did you accompany them on the same train previously, or was that the first time?

N: It was the first time for me to be on that train. I did some preparation in other trains. We completed shooting in one trip—three days and two nights. As we only had one battery, we couldn't replay the footage we shot. We thought we would just do it again if the footage didn't turn out. I was expecting a longer filming process. When we reached the Gobi Desert, however, my heart was filled with sunshine: the vast space promises hope. When the train left the greenery of Sichuan Basin for the barren desert where the earth is black, I had a strong feeling that all the things we are searching for in the end may be nothing but emptiness. The visual image of the desert, the sense of void, stunned me. When pursuing materialistic things, we lose our real goal.

Such pursuit of a better life often leaves us no time to reflect upon the true meaning of happiness or life.

W: Indeed. Did you ask these questions to all the passengers, or did you pick your interviewees beforehand?

N: I decided with my cameraman Guo Gang that we should both observe passengers before interviewing them. It was a very crowded train and we couldn't move freely. After observing for some time, we made decisions about whom we would interview. Everyone we chose ended up giving us a great story. There is much more in our original ten hours of footage.

Perpetual Motion: A film reaching an extreme

W: *Perpetual Motion* is an extreme film in more than one sense. There are quite a number of films in the 1980s and 1990s portraying "superwomen" and their conflicts with the outside world. In this film, there are four "superwomen" who are rich, famous, and successful in their careers. The setup of the story is interesting: Niuniu invites three girlfriends to her house with the intention of finding out who wrote those explicit emails to her husband. This setup seems to put the women in competition, but the suspense posed at the beginning of the film is not at all the key question in the end. I agree with Gina Marchetti, who calls this film "post-feminist," as these women's concerns are no longer about women's basic choices in life—marriage, career. I really think you've done a great job in presenting the spirit of each woman. In reality, however, when you worked with four women as famous and successful as the characters they portray, were there problems?



Liu Suola and Hung Huang in *Perpetual Motion*.

© Ning Ying

Director Ning Ying.
© Ning Ying

N: Of course, there were. From the start, Liu Suola already told me how she thought the film should be made. I hesitated for quite some time before taking up the project. In the film business, we all know it's not easy to work with your friends and film them in your film. It's almost taboo. After some time, I felt strongly that I had to make this film. Then I began to talk to Suola and Hung Huang⁽¹⁾ about the details of the film. Suola and I agreed on this film from the beginning, but Hong Huang's feeling towards the project changed in the end. She wrote a lot of dialogue, but was surprised by how film language challenges her writing. She couldn't face a "reel reality" that involved both words and images.

W: Hung Huang is at home with words like a fish in water, and I think she did a wonderful job portraying Niuniu. Nearly everyone loves the story of her first date with George. Before Niuniu tells that story, she's nervous and jealous about the explicit email her husband receives. The account of her first love turns her back into a confident, humorous, and charming woman. After her long monologue, however, the camera again begins to evoke controversy: not everyone can face the images it captures. How did Hung Huang feel about seeing herself in the film?

N: Very uncomfortable. Film is indeed a very provocative medium. When all the women were remembering their past, they realised how many scars they had from before. This film is harsh to all of them. Some criticised me for depicting these famous and hypocritical women, but the film has a cruel reality. Hung Huang asked me why I didn't act in front of the camera, but every one of them is part of me. I have to face the audience with my naked feelings. Hung Huang and I had many arguments, but we could never persuade each other. She said, "It's not yourself you're dissecting." To me, a film needs many dimensions, so it can reach different people and different possibilities for interpretation. When we were film students, we always looked down on genre films, because they rely on sending exactly the same message to every member of the audience, leaving you no possibility to take any distance.

W: Yes, genre films often have such accuracy in the message they try to convey. Today I watched *Perpetual Motion* for a second time and was very touched by Qinqin's story of her Japanese husband. I was struck by the way she delivers her feelings in speech—one that imitates her late husband with such vividness. I was not prepared for such a direct expression of happiness and sadness at the same time.



N: Qinqin told me that she didn't dare watch the film again. She lent some of her truest feelings to the film. Hung Huang did the same.

W: I feel the weight of their true experiences very clearly.

N: Of course those experiences are blended with certain fictional parts. All four women are famous women in the public eye. Hung Huang's stories can be read in many media. All of them shared their real experiences. I met the distributor of Wong Kar-wai's film in Japan, and he liked this film, but he couldn't persuade theatres to show it, as it was too avant-garde for the Japanese audience.

W: Your films before *Perpetual Motion* never focused on female protagonists. Are you aware of your own gender consciousness in cinematic creation?

N: A European woman, after seeing *Perpetual Motion*, told me that I had a clear woman's perspective in all my films, because I could portray the patriarchal society in an ironic and humorous way. She said, "You can already go beyond focusing on women's day-to-day struggle, so you have a very modern sense of feminism."

W: I think what she said is very true.

N: Really? But I only began to learn about feminist concepts while making *Perpetual Motion*.

1. The film was shot with four actresses who are all famous "personalities" in their own right. Hung Huang is a famous editor and journalist (currently chief-editor of World Metropolitan magazine); Liu Suola is a writer and composer. (editor's note)

W: Being ironic requires distance, and one's gender can serve this purpose well.

N: Yes, since you're not one of them, you can naturally stand aside.

W: Precisely. Although I felt sorry for the old man in *For Fun* at the end of the film, I also feel his entire story was ridiculous. In your earlier films, you have a strong sense of reality, making your film almost documentary-like. *Perpetual Motion* is different: you used a lot of original music.

N: You're right. This film has Suola's music with some classical Chinese motifs.

W: I think her music achieves at least two purposes: first, it extends the relatively closed space of Beijing's courtyard houses; second, it interacts with the emotions of the charac-

ters. The music supplements the image in a way that increases the possibility of interpretation to a great extent. Once you finish such an extreme film, won't people expect you to continue creating in the same direction?

N: Yes, they do. We didn't expect this film to do well at the box office. We didn't print enough copies to meet the demand of theatres. Now when I look for an investor for my next project, I'm expected to have another script like *Perpetual Motion*. This film has put me into a difficult position. I feel the danger of being thrown out of the film industry. This is why I accepted *Side A Side B*, a commercial film project, earlier this year. I'm hoping I can accumulate some credits with my films' marketability before making another film that I really want to make. •

Interview with S. Louisa Wei, 14 April 2009